

mipo companion



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GRANDFATHER

Crisis upon crisis, boulder-sized stacks of them,
teeter before him,
and there's no room to circle. The only way
is to learn to walk sideways, the body held sideways,
while advancing as straight ahead as possible,
like a fencer, a dancer coming out of a slow twirl,
or someone shouldering a path between stage curtains,
each crisis about to fall, each shame, each heavy sin
casting weird shadows on his face as he eases himself
carefully through. Or it's library bookshelves,
the slender corridors deep in dark crowded stacks
where he's almost lost. Should he look back,
he can see his whole life and everyone else's
as a series of narrow turns and daily escapes
from Death and its brothers: that plane crash
almost his; that incurable disease that flashed
just to his right; the leg cramp only minutes
after he'd reached shore. Can he still somehow fit
between those outcroppings? Will that ledge
hold as he squeezes across it? This rock bulge?
That stone tremble? For a while longer,
statistics say. For just a few steps longer. . . .

Bee God

Men are like that, Mom used to say. They can't laugh or fake it on cue. Or act as if everything's fine, thank you. Some days I can't either. Like last night, I tried writing an elegy for my dad. A therapist, suggested it might help with the grieving, recalling all the nice times. I tried. Honest to God I did. Then I gave up and started cleaning the house, sweeping dead bees from the window sills, fingering their fragile wings, remembering the day I saw my dad covered with bees.

It was spring, and the queen must have just arrived. I was only six, and I wanted to scream, but I was afraid the bees would hear me and sting him. I didn't know if bees could hear, but I thought, with all that buzzing they do, they might. But bees never stung my dad. He kept them in silver nests behind the chicken coop. Sometimes at night the bees would fly into our house through the broken screens and bop around the lights, and he would catch them in a napkin, hold them gently, then shake them loose outside. My father liked to say that we were gods for the bees, saving their lives and setting them free. That's what I do best, he'd laugh.

Bees

Nights my father walked the dirt path past the cow barns to the bees he kept in silver nests. There haven't been bees for years. That's how old he was, but he never did stop lecturing me on how to select the right kind of man. A honeybee, he always said, travels to the same kind of flowers. Why? Because a clover bee is meant for clover. I asked if he knew if the bees slept, and if they slept, did they dream. I liked orange blossom honey best. There were bees in our house, climbing the screens. Wasps too. My father caught them in a handkerchief and shook them loose outside. Whenever I tried, I squeezed too tight and broke off wings and legs. He always did say I'd never learn. I was like any fool woman. I was too full of fear and grab.

CORIE FEINER

Excess

To your crickets, cicadas, and parking-lot palms,
to your one hundred and three cable stations,
to your microwave filled with bags of bread,
to your Mar Jong tiles and scrabble chips,
lollipops and licorice.

To your seventeen purses and nine pairs
of white arch-less shoes.

To your refrigerator drawers of Florida fruit,
double D batteries, and tin foil wrapped rolls.

To your 2 p.m. naps and blood thinning pills,
to your diet of white toast and salt free soup.

I came without clotted vein or hysterectomy cut,
without obesity or swollen joints, without stitches or scars.

I came without husband or child,
my uterus as perfect as an unsoaked bean.

I came for the braille of your stapled skin,
for the story of your mother's dough,
how you pulled unborn chicken eggs from a carcass
and popped them like syrup candy under your tongue.

undressing Josephine in public

Josephine's left hip: black bottom banana cream pie (2 large firm bananas, cut into 2/3-inch slices, rum), banana *gratins* (2 large firm bananas, cut crosswise, sugar in the raw).

The inside curve of Josephine's left hipbone: banana fritters (4 ripe bananas, sliced diagonally, peanut oil), hurricane bananas (12 small ripe finger bananas (3 to 4 inches), molasses), hot banana *crème brulee* (2 medium firm-ripe bananas, sugar in the raw).

The smooth stretch under her belly: banana *clafouti* (1 large ripe banana, cut into diagonals, French vanilla), grilled bananas with Mexican hot chocolate sauce (4 firm-ripe bananas, Ibarra).

Josephine's sweet, warm right hip: peanut-crust ed fish fillets with fried bananas (2 unripe bananas, peanuts).

The swell of her ass, the hollow of her back, the swell of her ass: espresso banana napoleons (3 medium bananas, *je reviens en trois jours, ne lave pas*), caramelized banana purses (2 large bananas, Honduras), old south ambrosia (strange fruit. salt. water).

undressing Josephine in private

But then there's Josephine, just Josephine, and there's never a just with Josephine, under me, over me, Josephine, and the smooth slick of her skin in my arms, the weight of her head against the nape of my wrist, her laugh shaking my chest with her strength, her fury.

Her hand laces in mine, perfect, and it looks nothing like – it feels nothing like – a bunch of bananas.

from Texture Notes

Texture of a free, autonomous, independently and non-battery-operated small traditional and smoothly-surfaced rock.

Its very smoothness a testament to the non-battery-operated yet eventful or eventless life it has heretofore sustained.

People, pilgrims, innocent bystanders, drivers-by, tourists and locals alike come and gather, independently and in their own time, in their very own time, to admire it.

To enjoy it.

To provide a physical, a chemical, a psychoanalytical, a textural analysis of it.

To assign it values of beauty.

A Brief History Of Time

We are looking for the clue to a mystery, a relative inside our own blood, an animal so equal it reflects what we hate and love about ourselves.

—Linda Hogan

&now, right alongside Cygnus—Hear the great wings whoop-whooping?—real as raven yesterday buzzing so low, the red squirrel dropping a pinecone from its mouth. One of us says it, though, "How do you see a swan in just five points?" and to me, too, they just look like stars, but Joon's being sky pilot, steering us. "It's the Northern Cross," he says, his voice above, cool, clear as night, as though cruising the cosmos, and says, "It's called dark matter." "They don't know," I say, thinking for all our stories it's still a mystery who I am or on whose license I am winging where. Sasha's telling how she used to be called Sasquatch Bionic Big Foot Woman. Michael pipes in he was called Michael Michael Motorcycle, and—Jeez! I am thinking, don't we sound like family. And we are drifting, at least 10 of us, foot to foot, head to head, crosscrissed whichever way, as if someone tossed matchsticks across the floating dock, stars in the lake, the bowl of night above around far as eye can see. "Oooooooo!" "Ahhhhh!" I've missed another shooting star. How come they all see them? Eric, who's from Brooklyn, sees himself shooting through Ursa Major. "I feel so far from home," he says, "We don't see stars much—bears either." Someone howls— or was it a loon? or wolf? Here, among Leo, Sagittarius, Pegasus, we're all something wilder. "Where's Orion's belt?" someone asks, "and what's that cluster low, over there?" "The Blue Whale," Joon says, and of course, he's lying—the heavens being no ocean. But you know that hot dervish, Rigel, in Orion's foot, is 50,000 jumps tougher than the Sun, only one of 200 billion in the Milky Way, itself just one of a million galaxies? Do you know, do you know each second the Sun tears up four billion tons of something into light, and we're all— big foot woman to galaxies—floating here on Eagle Lake this blue star September night, second millennium, plus three.

Blend

As the water finds fissures in sand, floating below and pushing up
As the tint film scribbles hard edges into zigzags
As the floral cloud migrates over and dissipates into memory
As the television becomes me and I become the television
As the static overcomes the challenge of conscious thought
As time truncates and overlaps into brown and gray, a single amalgam
As in the rain the construction paper tie-dyes and patterns
 From which to choose your history and self-definition

So the demons squeeze in like toothpaste but no one notices
So you back your car into a bus stop, killing ten
So you explore shimmering patterns in your head until they divide
So you push a kite into space with a taught spring, penetrating birds-eye
So you band according to category, subset, type, range, group, field
So you address a random one, "identify," "strike," "skew," "deviate"
So you change your name in circles and subdivide, become the stranger
 Whom you love from across the aisle

Get Over Myself

Get over myself, as the cow jumps over
the moon, as the child on the magic carpet
sails in from outer space entitled to speak,
spilling all the beans inappropriately,
spilling myself, as a stream over the dam,
framing my face in a proscenium arch,
a painted backdrop with branches and a sky,
an evening star, whole galaxies out there
that never heard of me or my poetry.

Packing It Up

You, with a handle on things, your vacuum
snorting the last dust from the corners
of the den, how easily pleased you were
to clean a home you wouldn't remember
living in. You scalped the ornamented shelves
with one quick swipe and the ballerinas,
the miniature lambs shattered against
your smack. The paint boys spackled
the nail holes, lacquered over your childhood
in one flat eggshell coat.

The town came to shop and see what had been
hidden in the old house. The yard, trashed
with keepables: television, mica
table lamp, bassinet. The beautiful
neighbor misheld your old bassoon, but you
stood back, admiring her manicure.
In the end, you filled your car
with picture albums, commemorative plates,
and the clothes you took to Goodwill.
Garbage men came to take the dumpster
the next day. And you, with a handle on things,
left the houseplants scorching on the lawn.

Kin Folks

The face of Aunt Norris
when she saw me hanging
flyers for a gay poetry group on a bulletin board.
The face of Uncle Weed when he got the word from Aunt Norris
that I might be queer.
Imagine my face
when he asked me,
drunk off his ass, if I suck dick.
The face of Aunt Earline finding
out the news from Uncle Weed,
who found out from Aunt Norris,
that her nephew, who loves her jelly cake
more than life, likes men the way women do.
Imagine the face Auntie Alice made
when it was whispered in her ear by her daughter,
my cousin, Chrissy, that her nephew, the son
of one of her brother's is a punk.
Just picture the faces of cousin Velvet and cousin Toni,
who used to give me free chicken at Popeye's
and all the burgers I could eat from Burger King,
that her cousin, the one she never sees anyway, is a fag.
Imagine the face of the twins, Kee-Kee and Kenny,
finding out from cousin Sean, in a game of gin rummy,
that it is rumored that I, the 'ham' of the family, is a faggot.
Imagine how far the wrinkles of Auntie Mable's face stretched,
How Dee, her husband's mouth dropped, when they got wind
of the latest familial scandal that her nephew, the cousin to her daughters,
Tameka, Monique and Kim, the second cousin to their
children, plays for the 'pink team'.
The face of Leisha getting the call in Virginia,
The face of Duane hearing of it in Wakulla,
Just picture the faces of Ebony and J.R. putting two and two together
after figuring out exactly which cousin I am, and
being none other than shocked
beyond belief that I kiss and lie with men.
The face of my uncle they call 'Chicken Man,' the
brother to sisters, the brother to brothers,
the father to son and daughters, and the ex-husband to
his ex-wife in Woodville,
hearing that I could possibly be an all out
abomination, a sinner, a sodomite.

At The Entrance to the Santa Cruz Wharf

Huge granite ball sculpture perfectly round,
with its twin cloved in quarters adjacent.
I run my hand over the smooth surface of the first,
gauging perfection-sit between the split pieces
of the other, somehow more familiar:
how we are opened, no matter the density,
the desire to remain whole, unaffected.
Then, running my hand over the pillared arch
nearby-fashioned like the number Pi-I feel
the endless decimals of my life stream out to sea:
an equation unresolved. I am nothing but metaphor
& bone wrapped in skin. How else to explain
the passing of days, the wonder, each gorgeous
uncertainty?

I Find Myself at Gymboree with Holes in Both Socks

Shoes come off at the door
so I can tread mats like some gymnast.

I'm new at this and my daughter is cranky.
Class has started. I'm the only father.

Two holes. And the Yuppie wives
from Fairfax with their perfect teeth
and SUVs say nothing.

I wish I were French
or at least Brazilian,
wearing cool sunglasses,
vaguely dangerous.

But I feel small.

The Incredible Shrinking Man
my new idol.

John Berryman in my Dreams

Blacking out in some basement café, crowded
And alone in the sad mid-century, I come back & go on
Hunting powder-puff angels, the pan-caked faces

Under bangs cut straight, the puckered mouths wet
With lipstick. Then do I move through night, glass
After each empty glass—am I all right?

Sure be: Henry's famous, even hip.
The kids pick me out in the dimmest bars
Or slopping late in the Chinese joints

Of Boston, on the make. It's always time
To get stuffed. Here's the edge of awake—
Cocktails, pack of matches, somebody's face

Watery-familiar. Hi there, stranger.
Here's to being up for something beautiful,
Regrettable and sore.

AUGUST 6th 1945

Went shopping that day. In the square
flowers in bloom, but on the turn.
I noticed how there is a sort of grandeur

in the passing of flowers. Youth, the full flush,
cannot have it all. The trees were turning too –
a curl and twist to each leaf,

some falling, some fallen. Early, I thought,
too soon, too little time in the world.
I paused, put down my bags.

There is a bench near the post office.
I sit there in the summer, in autumn
and watch the birds, the children.

I sat there on that day and, leaning back,
looked up through the branches. Did I
see the 'plane or only hear it?

Three breaths, nine heartbeats. Then the light.
And then the heat. And then the sound.
And only my shadow left behind.

THE OBJECTS EVERYONE DREAMS

His hand & the towel on my mouth, the forgetting—like the old Jewish story, how in the second before the sperm enters the egg,

the soul sees her whole life & chooses it, all of it. In a second of the second, before the soul comes down, an angel slaps her

on the mouth, & she forgets everything she knows, everything chosen: the memory pool, a wheel with the objects

everyone dreams. Mexico coming home with you to El Paso, at 14, so lonely on the military base, desert & tumbleweeds—

the scratchiest hairdos angry and free-rolling in the backyard, endless like the moon—one friend, Belinda, buying Skinny Dip

cologne, blue eye shadow from the PX, but no photographs not one, as if I wore an invisible cloak the whole time, aching

when I heard a motorcycle in the night, or sat in the right-hand lane of an eighth-grade classroom, wearing a blue ring

from Mexico, I only crossed the border twice, but it's gone or hidden like everything else right here with me all the time

I've been looking for it.

.FIRST COMMUNION.

...and then came Darius marching with cymbals,
drums and horns. He sweeps away the armies
of the world. They write on clay his victory—
something like the clay from which a man is made.
Now, down from the clouds a purple comb
of rain draws its teeth across the grassland.
The light of Sunday blows away.
On the prairie you see the rain coming for miles.
The carpet of bachelor buttons and dandelions
my heart goes out to waits for a trample of hail.
Buffalo have long ago forgotten this grass,
while bluebird and sparrow pass above it, too.
Still, we give a name to the land, then section it,
so it becomes a place within our thoughts.
Upon this grid the body and soul solidify.
Somehow, a spark that would be my father
had a destiny at this communion of earth and sky.
A child reaches for her father's hand.
Some say he turns, others say he blooms.
Her fingers close around the dusty wind.
Please take this veil of shadow from her eyes.
She is too young to see we are just blood,
bones and bad dreams—the very day she wears
her virgin dress remains the day her father dies.
We write on clay, we write on scrolls, we write
because the world and all it holds must slip away.
This baby's breath is pulled from fire.
These lips are wafers made from salt.
This is why a lover has the rusty taste of wounds,
and why his kisses brush our cheeks like wire.
The earth is silent now with all that passes.
It gathers in the fallen with a mute embrace.
Time and traffic wears translucent rivers in the air.
The jealous earth keeps its lovers to itself.

GROUND SQUIRRELS

Is it wrong to want to be that gray-tailed squirrel
who dines on the peel of my unfinished apple,
newly fished from the dumpster?
The relish with which he splits
the golden peel between his claws,
gnaws the flesh away.

Or better, the starlings that bully
their way to feeder, clean the grounds of its seed.
Their black beaks clicking on the concrete,
clearing the café tables of their crumbs.

This is how I loved you, you know.
 With the endless hunger of birds,
 the small-handed feasting of squirrels.

You, Joking, With Perspective

In the photo of us
resting for Naya in the Galilee
by the Montfort ruins, you are sunburnt
and have a mouthful of water
and laughing with your fingertips
which rest on themselves, almost
a pinch where they come together
under the skirt of your palm;
where they hover, nearly settled
on one goat of a herd
of goats grazing the far hill,
pursed as if to lift
it like a grain of sugar—
you are so poised, watching
with the telescoped gleam of your thumbnail
it strip a tree leafless
with the weight
of its thrown body
and clenched forelegs
for when to scoop
it like a pet
to your constellated lap—
and there, there I am, gleaming
in the curve as the paper bends
inward, slightly depressed, pressed
between your hands—

Roses and Crucifixes

Leon spray paints his name
on buildings all over Manhattan,
LEON..... LEON..... LEON
Adds a crucifix underneath,
the color of the sun's belly.
No-one has ever seen him.
Some call him God's messenger.
Others say he's just crazy.

Sara dresses in black, pretends
she's an artist, flattens her breasts
with duct tape til they look
like IHOP pancakes, thinks this
means she'll be taken more seriously

She paints pink roses.
Pink roses grow out of Bill
Clinton's fly. Pink roses rise
from monkey butts. She sold a rose
poking from Donald Trump's nose
to an old lady in the Bronx, Sara's
price for giving directions.

Sara never meets Leon, but passes
his crucifixes one day. Inspired,
she runs to her flat, paints a crucifix
on her belly in florescent pink,
opens her shades, dances in the window
nightly for one week. Exactly.
The Salome of Greenwich Villlage.

A man sinks to his knees beneath her window.
It's a sign, he says. Gives up sex for Lent.
Holds onto his head , avoids knives.
His wife soon leaves for her mother's.

Sara closes her shades,
drinks cool tea,
dreams of roses strangling
the Empire State Building.

Leon spray paints the Empire State dome,
finds himself thinking, oddly, of roses,
has strange cravings for pancakes,
lathered in nipple-pink molasses.

KEMEL ZALDIVAR

Prayer for Chrissy

There is a God
who makes it rain on women dressed in white
and a God
who clogs the veins of plumbers. There is a God
who rides horseback from the sun
to the furthest star, and a God
who is afraid of ponies. There is a God

inside a God inside a God inside
a sparrow's egg, and a God who abhors the scent
of broiled rams: a God of Spring and falling
things, and a God who untangles
the ribbons of incense smoke
that rise from trailer parks
on the Mojave's fringes.
There are a trillion Gods

warring over the centermost cubic inch
of the earth's core, and a trillion others
trapped inside a pink lipstick tube
at the K-Mart near Penn Station. Jenny McMahon
of Jacksonville will beget a God
who will come to rule the world's spiders.
You have a minute God

always on the tip of your tongue, and a few others
navigating the volutes of your cerebellum.
There is a snarled God who stays put
on a much larger God's credenza, holding his deeds
in place; there is even a God who does not like

your mother's lasagna. My baby's driving
from Ithaca to Miami tomorrow morning.
She has little dough and bad tires,
cannot read maps, has a blinding migraine,
fears darkness
and is every psycho's wet dream.

Oh peerless unassailable
gut-churning goosepimple-raising God;
oh you who can annihilate all
with but a sigh, and bring it all back
with a wink: run

your enormous and enormously subtle
hand down her back. Keep her car
and brain intact. Let not that inferior myriad
impair her; let no god that is not God
impose himself
between your will
and my wishes.

Letter from Mlle Paris to the Marquise de Montague, 1800

My father, André had been a groom for over thirty years in the de Brissac household until they turned him out, old and sick, without a sou. François, my little brother, supported the three of us. I am a lace maker, unemployed, since ladies do not wear lace during a revolution. One afternoon my brother did not return from the 2nd Battalion—I went out for news, and returned to a deserted house; the neighbors whispered that they had dragged away my father, imprisoned him along with my brother.

I wanted to join them, but I was not on the list.
I wanted to kiss them, but it was not permitted.
I waited outside the courthouse, but never learned the charges nor who denounced them

I followed the macabre convoy down sullen streets, crossed the Seine at the Pont au Change, along rue Saint Antoine outside the city walls to the square, "la Nation," where the guillotine from the Bastille was reassembled (residents of its old quartier complained of odors, blood clotted cobblestones, & the flies).

I watched the iron wedge drop, and wanted to die with them, but God held me fast. When I came to my senses, night had fallen, the square was nearly deserted. I waited in the shadow; followed the bloody track to Picpus, the former convent of the Augustines. The carts disappeared behind a stout door into the garden and reappeared empty. Only God can distinguish the de Noailles from the Paris. My brother and my father lie beneath, with your sister, your mother, and your grandmother. I come in summer and in winter to pray in secret for their souls. It is my Sunday walk.

The Washington Monument

I was after the pear tree with the little hatchet
when my old man grabbed me by the ear, made me
sit on a bucket, put a cherry in a dollar bill,
wrapped it up and said Eat.

The way the juice ran out, the way
the paper balled up, the way the seed went down,
to where I remembered my grandpa grabbing
a rind from my hand, and saying

If you swallow the seeds, they'll grow inside. Don't.
When was it I learned to floor an Oldsmobile,
steal watermelons, cut a cork and fill the fruit
with vodka? How they froze and wouldn't freeze,

until we were young at once and together,
and ate on the car hood, spitting
into the cotton field and quiet
when a seed went down. Mary, Mary, quite contrary.

How we loved on that metal.
How we baked in that sun. How does your garden grow?
And the night came, and the crickets came, and we
came, and came to know the sound of wood cracking in the
wind.

My head on your stomach, the mystery of things moving,
things alive, things distant and unbroken and warm.
How I jerked when I heard the seed sprouting.
How I sighed when I heard it passing through.

lost flesh

i

here's the bed she lies in
the sheets might as well be snow
she's so cold
the heat disperses above her
the ceiling blankly accepts it
she sinks clean as a stone

ii

when she wakes there's a scar
where a breast used to be
she shows it to me
excoriated and raw
her eyes shine
behind a dam of tears

iii

when we cross the street
she holds onto my hand
as if I was ten again
and things were still to happen

Uneasy Postcards

Spring has nestled under leaves
like a ghost living in a cardboard box.
The college students are drunk and roam
the streets like packs of wild memories
looking for the telephone booth where
we agreed to meet. Still picking out
my clothes, I'm as nervous as a seventh-
grader French kissing.

I caught a fly and tortured it until it breathed
your name, twice, and died with a whimper.
This got me thinking about air
and how you interrupt it, becoming a volcano
in the middle of the ocean.
The earth was shaking; magma throbbed like
a balloon filling with water at the kitchen tap.
Are you lonely too?

When I saw the mountains here,
I looked at my watch and remembered home.
You were most likely at the drive-in,
or roller skating, lost in your thoughts,
a butterfly loose in a monkey cage.
Meanwhile, I drifted on my back in the hotel
swimming pool. Nothing to do but dream.

how to listen to boleros

visit abuelo
steal his 78's
find a busted up
turntable
that plays
out of one speaker
carry it home

on a rainy day
hang your hammock
from two leafless trees

pour three fingers
of dark rum
into a clear glass
sip slowly

dressed in a wrinkled
linen guayabera
dance
one hand raised in the air
the other pressed to your chest
and cry

portrait, with jesus

She was waiting in front of us
At the pharmacy counter
Of the drugstore,

Her forehead furrowed,
Her back bent
In an unmistakable gesture

Of inner pain, of mental pain,
Wearing pj's and flip-flops, clutching
Her arm on her father's arm—

Or was it her boyfriend? Hard to tell
(Pain blends distinctions) and on
Her white wrist

A hospital bracelet, her name
And birthdate, 1982—
The year I started college—

She's 22 years old.
I want to tell her something,
I say, "it'll get better — that's a nice tattoo"—

Jenni plonks down
The checkbook for my Paxil, steadily
Leans down and writes the date, the money.

from sent(i)ence

Today it is my pleasure. Allow me to introduce; allow me to fall; allow me to trance with you as you peel the skin from citric pulp in drops. Let's spend. I've only got two ands and one but, but I know that you and I can save the world with earplugs and muzzles. It was cut off, in the middle of word. A carefully placed insult to keep wasps in their nests, the Prime Minister is born again and blasphemy hits back on the answering machine. I called you, and you called names. So detailed that the Devil couldn't help lining each one's container with velvet. Where we'd like to be is where we were, and in the imagination—picture window of sweet green mountains, tart rain over baked sunrise, puffed-up pillowy thunderheads, and the promise of wildlife—fusty refusal takes a walk around the block looking for certain amphibians to emerge after a usual afternoon downpour. Don't you wish you knew that recipe for dates, or at least something to make, in the voice of Donald Fagen, tonight a wonderful day? Uh huh, that's the way of all roses, even at war. If one looks at seated patrons just so, nervous energies bonded into each bounce deepen the dark circles and dispel the notion that we're all in it together. With enough luck, you too can own this amazing new appliance, one that cuts through astral cords like OJ hitting a hole. Let's ask the mayors to declare this one dead, or blend citizen arrests into something resembling political action. Yeah, that's the thicket. Just as progressives will never be able to hold it together, public fascination with the brand of milk that Superman pours onto his corn flakes each morning will feed itself well into the next Ice Age.

motion and rest

there are the thoroughfares we follow
rivers of empty hearts sucking air
mad trails of blood slashed into mountainsides
oceans growing deeper and farther
the more they are measured and charted

there are the signs we have obeyed
or ignored at our peril-
shifting hues of sky
a sudden hush
the click of a lock
in the office of thoughts

there are the places we find ourselves at rest
collapsing into our hands
idle fruit scattered and softening
on the forest floor

and there is the light that moves us
from under the shadowy reel
of winged scavengers
it is the hope we hold
in this world of clock springs and arrows

Trials

This morning I put on my left hand
the gold ring with the gorgeous
hand-set diamonds. How foolish to box
myself in with that expensive purchase—I want
what I don't have, have what I then
don't want.

Mother sat on the lawn and cross-stitched,
sat and cross-stitched.

I write and rewrite, write and rewrite.

Jim's father tried him for misdeeds, the trials,
he said, worse than the beatings.

Jim was not a schizophrenic
but he hummed like one in movies,
tapping on the shared armrest.

At the coffee shop he suggested for our screening
he put his cards on the table:

"I used to drink." But we both loved
opera, I imagine for the same reasons.

But I'd never have slept with him, although
after listening to my new Kiri CD, which moved
us both, we tried sex, upstairs
on the brown corduroy couch from the office
I no longer rented to write in. I thought he'd cry—
his body was white and flabby and he had red chest
hair.

Sweetly my Jim in worn cords vouchsafed
now he wouldn't touch anyone else.

Three months later he is dead.

Two Truths & A Lie

I

No streaking comet trail, no stars, no
moon reflecting sun—just slow
& gauzy dark up up above & nothing
to see through or to, the threat of emptiness,

the emptiness a threat, & now (it is later) &
now, later & later still, my legs won't stop
moving, walking me restless through streets.
Dazed & happy, night-birds sit silent as coal.

II

Late night & too far removed from what
keeps me here; I'm lost, lonely & lost &
alas the map is ripped, torn to shreds, or else
smudged up so much it makes no damn sense.

Three days in a row I've danced the same steps,
movements all the same, & now (it is later) &
now, later & later still, I have no idea how to live
this life. My empty hands in front of me.

III

Bright bright moon, two days from full, my hands
seem to glow. You could sail ships clear of rocks,
drive without headlights. You could blindfold yourself
& know right where to go. & now (it is late for me)

& now, later & later still, slow sleep comes
over me exactly the way you find yourself
suddenly awake—not sure how it happened,
not sure it's what you want.

AM I AFRAID TO BE A WOMAN OF SIGNIFICANCE?

— *in the voice of Mary Wollstonecraft 1759-1797*

The fear of blindness is worse
Than the fact.
Rousseau ridicules us,
“Educate women and the more they
Resemble our sex, the less power will
They have over us.”

That is not what I seek, but power over ourselves!

We are like little cucumbers
Row upon row, gleaming,
Ready to be cut, sugared, or baked.

The moral life is to see
The harvest! The peeling,
Be the knife! The self as source.

London. With a job of my own
In a flat with old walls,
I get up earlier than most men.
I write. All day I write for other people.

I go to bed later than most men.
Do our dreams affect our days, or
Do our days affect our dreams...
I would like someone waiting for me.

I long for a cup of tea.
The light is on the wall.
It falls on my plain wooden bed,
The gray curtain.

Teach yourself how to think, Mary!
For no one else will do it for you.
Be the knife.

Tracks & Paths

They were never the Waldrop's,
they were nubile machinists that
refused to take holidays, apartment
littered with pinecones and socket
wrenches, corkscrews and special
hooks for hunting halibut in certain
climates, the climates you were
never really in, except in postcards,
the ones with your mother's shoes
and your face, tight against her
muslin frock, or was it polyester,
I forget, I always forget, forever
in the act of unknowing the "Once
Knowable," so armor my anger—
oil up the robot of me with flexible
joints and prize pigs turning on
wooden spits, ahhhhhh, to rust-up
in a summer rainstorm, to atrophy
to the vibrations of a babies boom
cry, a baby that is not your own
but that of the man on the train,
the one with no smile and scuffed
suede shoes, forgetting all others
the ones that stopped looking
and they were never at Brown,
never in Providence, or double
billed at *Double Happiness*, no
they were not the Waldrop's
and that was not their baby,
gurgling up milk and staring
at the Hudson River.

Two Answers, Four Questions, One Statement of Fact, Three Useless Platitudes, and One Unfinished Thought

Punctuate accordingly:

I can travel anywhere with additional pain

I was willing to be easy but then things got complicated so damn quickly

The slow sad waltz of my favourite perversion

My theory is that there are only four kinds of suffering and two kinds of joy that exists in the entire world

We just pass them around back and forth, on e-bay, at flea markets, and in the dust we inhale

What is apology but anthropology without its or nth degree
What is shellfish but selfish

If it's not butter, it can be fried in butter

How mesmerizing is that montage of cats falling off television sets, backs of sofas, kitchen tables, and assorted shelving units

Does invincibility have more to do with persistence rather than the possession of superhuman traits or is it dumb luck

Like telling an ant it is a lion, but an antlion is something else altogether

Like eating a really good hamburger on the sluicing floor of the abattoir

Shit in a bag and punch it

For the version of how things will end we have yet to write
Who's to say how this won't end

Oh look, a typo in the Rosetta Stone

to the zoo

1
when stopped mid
jaywalk I felt
intersected. want no
fliers. want to say
I am from here. where
I wrote a 75 page paper
on pandas in 9th grade.
where I saw two in the Bronx.
learned the word "advisory"
in bio. ms. kaplan. with purple
eyeliner. texts
covered in contact.
like eyes. one
frog passed with hand
over heart. a salute
no pin prevents.

2
she with secure handshake.
rip that arm right out
the socket. it is now I know
gender. know caviar.
fertilization. sexuality.
even with animals
she needs no gloves.
a strength all her own.
biceps understated.
like lab coats.

3
remember when brian sliced
open a cow's eye. pocketed
its insides. looked
like marble. clear.
but solid. stark.

4
I once had a choice
tangibility or electronics.
remember insides
of earthworms.
so dark. I drew the line
with feline. something
about fur. familiarity.
pandas won't eat bamboo
covered in snow.

A Constellation

The room was full of stars.
Their light white, iridescent.

The blue behind them, darker
than my darkest dream.

He was there. He wore
a shirt embroidered with stars.

Against that night sky,
I could barely see him.

I thought it better to stay,
discontent as I was.

As I woke, he threw
open the window.

The vacuum was broken.
All of the stars rushed out.

BOXCAR WAITING

This expanse of vast your mouth
This influx of Faust your thrush

Apprehend more crystal with a broken lance
Take a stance approximately undershirt

Painted china broken up your rain
Stormy fancier place a velvet packet hence

This potted plant of saffron in your dirt
This half-rung bell in toto up the main

Pants a bottle with a favorite song
Play it softly Sam *here comes your man*

A flag that flies sincerely parody with Kristin
This American pandowdy leaks: undoing of a button

Two Elegies

For the blood of me
I cannot recall her ringlets
As they cut the air to touch the floor,
As I imagine they did, but I do recall
The glint of light as she pointed the scissors at me,
The sun behind my head, the piano strings
Snapped, a violent glare, my vision broken to grey.

*

I took cold water from the river in my hands, drank,
And looked down to see a rock turn black with the memory of my face.

Portrait of Helen at Forty-Something

Half smile.
Uplifted nose defies the air.
A divine trace of her father's swan eyes
still lurks, half drowned beneath
the tranquil colors of ageless lagoons.
Blue moons dissolved
in clouds at dusk.
She speaks a present day
dialect of lost isotopes and xenon dust,
betrayed by the ancient
rhythm of Leda's hips.

She does not recognize me.
I sit across her, in a sea of dead men
who argue modern numbers
and utter words unknown by the past.
I'm still a city in France.
I'm still the blood colored
promise of grapes,
the darkest rose,
raspberry smooth, and treacherous.

She thinks herself a mortal.
I think herself far more.
The fire and grace of flamenco,
the sweeping desire of skin,
cat walk muse, fertility rite.
Memory of dreams of fire,
empty horse, failed Trojans.
Helen is still launching
ships at forty-something.
Paris still awaits across the sea.

Versailles: A Little Havana Blues

Décima for Richard Blanco

In the picture, I can tell you're there,
laughing with friends and smiling for the camera,
the picture of Generation Ñ, the air
around you warm and lush, the clear
sky above punctuated by algunas palmas.
Little Havana, as we hold it up,
is not what we remember or what
we want to keep: it's a little cup
of forgotten stuff. It's dinner, late,
at Versailles: platanos, moro, pork chops.

DinnerTime

If I cook the spaghetti
for 4 minutes instead
of 3 I won't have
enough time to run
upstairs and turn on
the TV and watch a
little girl shoot her
mother because she
doesn't receive her
inheritance that which
is rightly hers because
her mother who killed
her very rich father
squandered it all on
worthless real estate
ventures casinos playboys
and various cads and
confidence men BLAM
BLAM BLAM It's just
blanks the little girl
says to her mother You
are some kind of child
her mothers says to her
in a clear tone of understatement
while wearing perfectly appointed
bare back soft crepe de chine by
Vionett in thought provoking,
not like Plato or Einstein
thought provoking, mind
you something far richer
and sweeter and more
confectionary when suddenly
BLAM BLAM BLAM
I was just kidding about
the blanks the little
girl says her mother
slumps to the
floor Really I don't

Are her last words what could
they mean I think justice was
served today and I think the

little girl is not so little really
if she wore something
provocative and didn't always
have a gun why I think that
she would look incredibly
grown up but clearly not
someone that you would
want to date you would have
to be so careful all
the time although some
people prefer that
Oh My God the spaghetti

The spaghetti I forgot
the spaghetti again but
regrets no What
about dinner My Darling
Well dinner is served no
My Darling I have no regrets

I saw this through the violence that made it take place and we—at least most of the rest of the people in the audience—were always thinking of you there, but first things first: what came like a shock to all our falling. You were asked to do something and then that something became part of you or you, wasn't that the way it was, and if it wasn't it wasn't. I can only continually think of their flayed faces, how hard it must've been to get the rest of the flesh from the cheekbones, say—

Maybe there were other reports but no-one saw you falling. No-one wanted specifically to kill you, to take your face. It's hard to be reduced to and remembered through certain partings. I have been and am watching you, from the first day.

I liked a little mouse because it was my friend in the burning. When they took the rest of you and me out and called us long and thought we would burn like meat and were right I knew they were wrong, because I was a child. They were simple, simply wrong. Still, I hated to be burned. I hated too when you were burned. My mouse said Yes.

I didn't like the way we, among the feelings, were left more or less alone. Now I know why some hunt others and end them. It was included in the maps they taught us in school, except they couldn't then see my and their own bodies burning in the end.

I am sick of the burning, I made it. I am anyone, I hate to forget so long. I did what others thought. It was basic action, blurred in purity. Fire comes from the pretty mouths, clean. I love what I am, in the flames.

PATRICIA SMITH

WHEN DEXTER KING MET JAMES EARL RAY

There was a tender in them both, a place picked raw.
As Southern men do, the clasping of hands that know
weather. Eye linked to eye, unflinching, the flat-toned,
muttered how-do. How do you? And the scripted respect,
the pudge-cheeked preacher inquiring idly after the dying
man's days. Whole wars in them, but just a single rupture.
Their halos florid, overglowing, some news reporter hissing
expectantly into a dead silver mic: Say it, *say it*. James Earl
liver-toned, wobbling on old bone, one lazy eye perked for it.
It. The King rolls his Rs, throats elegant, sweats bullets into
his collar. Having shaved too keenly, his beard is peppered
red, whispering blood. And still the pleasantries. Exactly how
does one go from commenting on the weather (it's hot: awfully
humid: smells like more rain: hope it lets up) to asking did
you frame my father's head in your gun sight, did you empty
his dinner chair, lonely my nights, pull back on that trigger?
Jesus, he looks just like his nigga daddy, James Earl thinks,
*Bet he can call on God and turn his other cheek with the best
of them. Go on, get it out, boy. I'm dying heah*. Cameras whir.
The men are like fools, silent, damned respectful, exactly a
yardstick between them. And it's the windup, the pitch: Sir, I
have to ask you, sir, my kind sir, excuse me, I hate to bother
you sir, but I have to ask for the record, *Did you kill my father?*
And if the answer is yes, will there be a throttling, an errant
sob, a small silver pistol slipped from an inside pocket? And if
the answer is no, will there be a throttling, an errant sob, a
small silver pistol slipped from an inside pocket? Time has a
way of growing things all huge, lifting up our soul to shove in
the splinter. But, surprisingly, James Earl resists double-take,
spittle and the wide-eye. *No, I didn't. No, sir. No*. That settles
it then, that settles it. And we're locked in on this limp drama
long after the credits have rolled and Hollywood Squares has
taken over, long after the network has anthemed and dimmed
to snow. Time for a Twinkie and a brew. Time to fall asleep with
a clear head. Time to celebrate the slow sweet of Southern men.
It's time to rejoice in the fact that nobody killed nobody,
and high time to forget that somebody died anyway.

JOE WENDEROTH

HALLUCINATION AND PRIVILEGE

*There is no poetry but of the creative acts of kings and gods
and of the servile dreamers they hallucinate.*

—Allen Grossman, from *Summa Lyrica*

To place a king or a god at the origin of poetry is decidedly at odds with our assumptions about the privilege implicit in poetic speech. The fact that Grossman goes further and *invalidates* poetic speech originating anywhere else may even provoke the suspicion, in some, that he is kidding. He's not kidding. Kings and gods, at one time, were given to the pursuit of poetic speech. That time has passed—poetic speech no longer flows from kings or gods. We look to the latter instance, then; we look to the hallucination, which is possible. That is, it is not unthinkable for us to conceive of poets as hallucinatory voices dreamt into place by some mysterious “higher” authority, if by authority we mean simply the in-tandem mechanisms of the dream-apparatus. Poetic speech, in this latter instance, can be understood to provide a service for kings and gods. That service, if we think it inversely, implies a kind of bondage, and the word “servile” stresses it. Poetic speech, then, so long as it remains poetic speech, *is not yours*. It issues always through you, never from you; it issues from a dream within a hallucination. Your opportunity is small—it is to submit to the dream; it is to allow the dream and the service it provides to take place through you.

We are not accustomed to thinking of “creative acts” in this way, which is to say, as devoid of personal and social intentions. Nor are we accustomed to thinking of hallucination in this way; we understand hallucination nowadays to suggest mental or physical deficiency, irresponsibility, danger. Grossman places hallucination at the very foundation of things—not a spontaneous personal malady but an abiding source, synonymous with the fact of the powers that persona is forever subjected to. Persona, then, is never the creator of poetic speech, nor is it the primary concern of poetic speech. Rather, poetic speech is always a dream, and a dream that exists *before* persona; this dream unfolds as a demonstration of the servile nature of persona. As it opens itself up, a poem plumbs persona's troubled tenancy within the dream and thereby disintegrates the specificity (the alleged autonomy and the knowability) of persona. One thinks of Dickinson's: “I am No One/ who are you?” Within this disintegration of persona, *the function* of persona is made clear. No specific autonomous persona is capable of demonstrating this kind of clarity; each specific persona is capable only of becoming the site of the dream whereby this clarity finds itself out.

To achieve a specific autonomous persona is to engage with one's dream without understanding it as a dream, and thus, it is to imagine oneself as *not subject* to the contradictions that have given rise to one's being. Grossman's statement is particularly jarring because it severally undermines the vanity of persona, insisting above all on its recurrent foundationlessness. It is founded, after all, in something that could not be more *other* to our ordinarily imagined selves: divine hereditary hallucination. But his statement is not really mystical; kings and gods are never said to actually exist, and there is no reason to suggest that Grossman believes they do. We can and should maintain our common sense

and say that kings and gods exist only in our imagination... *but what we imagine is not whatever we like* (as we so often assume)—*to the contrary, our practice of imagination is all but wholly determined by a specific history (a history of terms and of ideas and of the sentiments they make to carry)*. We enter into that imagination, then, *on its terms*, not ours. Kings and gods, whether they were ever real or not, are nevertheless, as imagined entities, built in to our practice of language, and especially into our practice of poetic language.

Like language itself, the poem is something that is always (to a very great extent) *there already*, and the poet enters into it to verify it or to feel its uniquely peculiar glamour more than he comes into it to claim it as his own. And while poetic space may be said to be vulnerable to a kind of history... it may also be said to be invulnerable, and to insist on a host of contradictions that are on-going and culturally universal: power/submission, belief/doubt, creation/destruction, dream/reality. A Blake quote comes to mind: "without Contraries is no progression." And Celan: "Speak—but keep yes and no unsplit." Blake's notion of progress, here, must give us pause. What is *poetic* progress?

One thing is certain: poetic progress is in no way connected with the progress of a persona. Poetic progress progresses on its own—progresses not through persona so much as through the crisis of persona, the failure of persona. Think of persona as a kind of humming; to the extent that this humming might decrease in volume, the music playing in the next room might become audible. We might say that our ability to decrease the volume of the humming is our ability to dream, which is the same as saying that our ability to hear the music in the next room is our ability to dream. To speculate on the relationship between the humming and the music in the next room is not my intention here; I am satisfied to point out that it is a decrease in the humming that allows for the other music to enter into "our" realm. This other music, the music in the next room, is not ours—it is deeper, older, and its authority is akin to the authority of what, at one time, was referred to as a king or a god.

Poetic speech, the music in the next room, progresses like any music, which is to say, not by way of its instrument so much as by way of logics in the sounds the instrument is capable of. Those sounds have a past, and in that past its future is to a large extent coded. At its most powerful, poetic speech is its own thing, with its own imaginary destiny. The poet's privilege is not creativity but proximity to creativity, proximity to the dream that allows access to a new instance in this parallel history. Poetic speech is like the ocean. We all know about it, know "what it is," its history and what it's made of, etc... but then suddenly one finds oneself standing there beside it, and it is not an idea—it is a real thing, a real phenomenon.

At this moment one does not create it so much as allow it to create itself, and allow it to be absorbed, yet again, into the history of its idea. That might sound bleak; why should one bother? In the moment of a poem's utterance there is, perhaps, a kind of vitality. Celan describes it as a "gleam" "in the swell of wandering words." It may be that we do not want that gleam. It might be argued, that is, that it simply seeks itself.

How to Write on Grand Themes

1.) Keep your audience in mind.

As there will always be writing solely for one. It is easy: imagine that just for once, for you, your beloved begins to have pity. (He sees how you eye longingly the hands of the pampered and plush, the groomed young ladies. You think, This will never happen; this will never happen to me.) For this one and for this one only, you age; your journals are projected into some lonely future where, huddled and cold, you have only one can of soup to last you. The focal point in the room is the door, through which your beloved may or may not enter to save you.

2.) Include a Search for the Great Unknown.

It may or may not have happened as you had liked, but there was always something like a chase in it. Over the cliff, you may or may not have spotted a jewel in the ravine. The boy with the trembling umbrella may or may not have called your name. You see, there will be a heavenly castle; there is a holy grail; there did fall golden apples. The page will always remain allusive. Give everything then: upon dying you may or may not know if he loved you, really loved you—you can go on, with all of your eye-closing, your convulsing, your brutal burial, the rites and the rest of the shrouding and transporting. You will know then if you were or were not his woman in white.

3.) Dream.

Because it will happen when you least expect—the mystery explained in terms of what you were feeling. The anonymous letter is not so anonymous, and so, you go on addressing, not knowing that all the while there is something in dreams so desperately addressing you. The dove, the wedding gown, the orchid and iris, the little little pillow—you will dream but you will not have. The monk in white is shaving her hair and eyebrows; the songbird is calling; the fog is not lifting; the traveler will hear voices. Among the rows and rows of cabbages and turnips, only the drifter in sleep will find the one with a heartbeat.

4.) Know when you are and are not making love. (Keep things in.)

Because more often than not, you will not be making love. So, when you are making love, you should know it fully and nothing else. (It takes great training to divorce one's always thinking of eminent endings.)

You will always feel as if you have just done something wrong, as if an apology is in order; however, you will never know to whom your apology should be addressed.

It is best to keep things in—this way, there will be no exposed skin. He will not know what it was you most wanted; anyhow, he would never have given in.

5.) Pay particular attention to detail.

Because they will leave you. Every moment will be very important. You may not know it in the doing of it, but when he holds you, this is very important. Take note of that sunset. Don't close; do close your eyes. You will wish; it will never happen again. The aforesaid moment already acting as artifact—the teacup so lonely, so empty.

6.) Cry about it.

But only afterward. If you lose a child, calm yourself: it was only imaginary. She will rise again in her white night gown; she will ask after her father. Morning sickness will give way to. Always a dull moment; chandeliers shivering. It might be best to be. Incomplete. That is when it might start: the choppy sentences, the memory oblique. Beware of the man with a few words. If you lose a child, calm yourself: it was only virginity.

7.) Name your enemies.

You must give up thinking that you will ever be at your best. Blame it on the big, capitalistic machine, blame it on the weather, blame it on whatever, but blame you must. Blame it on her, because she was there and she was willing. It was the Sirens' song; it was another strange cacophony of hearts and breaths. You must attribute fault to the fishnet stockings, the Brazilian bikini, the manicured nails, the bottleblonde. The devil is real and she is sleeping with.

Don't allow your readers to know what you are thinking: they are waiting to find faults in your logic, discrepancies in your tone, falters in your dress; they will point out whether you are too young or too old; they will say that your whole wardrobe is nothing more than a gimmick, because they all feel a bit deflated after the harlot's show of skill, her cheap tricks, her sleight of hand.

Hate the pinwheel and glitter. Say his proper name: first name last.

8.) Edit lightly.

More often than not, if you are approaching the act of writing due to some internal circumstance, then likely you will not be too attached to whatever it is you are writing. Immediately, you will think that your tone is too self-pitying, too inclusive of the privacy of whatever disaster transpired to you and you alone. No one saw you in the taxi crying. All along, you were giving yourself away too freely; here now is your chance to keep and hold whatever it is you own, to say it and then retract it and say it again and to mean it, to really mean what you say, to use everything.

9.) Obsess.

Remember: It is not my job, he said. It is not my job to take care of you. Remember: I'll tell you right now, I'll make a terrible. Remember:

10.) Invoke the supernatural, especially ghosts.

It will happen, and you will say chance or coincidence—fate is never something that comes, at least not until much later. (Just when you are thinking that someone may be dying, that person does die.) How else to explain the inner workings? (So fully I believed my sister when she said that inside little, perfectly round stones there lived the coiled souls of angels.) If you haven't any ghosts now, then invoke them or make them up if you know who may or may not be lurking. Say: the mysterious envelope (always too late) is falling from a sublime grace; say: the code matches exactly his license plate; say: the handwriting reminds me of someone I once knew; say: really, I was here before; say: you loved me briefly, but in a lifetime past; say: maybe it was just not meant to be, maybe I shall today start calling on fate; say: how did I come to be here in bed with you, and then here again without you?

11.) Learn dictation; take pictures; make good notes.

Never assume that what is being said will be remembered when you most need to repeat it to the outside source who may or may not need it more than you do. What is said—it all needs to be crucial. What is uttered once is just once and all else is but a mere echo. Get the song lyrics right: sing and do not hum. When your lover says I love you, I do you will want to write it down; you will want to keep rereading it forever and ever. Let us say it this way: the waltz will not go on, but you will want to keep.

12.) Close quietly.

Like the rustle of yellowing, sycamore leaves; however, if you prefer, the shaking of spring lilies too will do. If you want to make a scene, know that your memory will forever be creating one for you. In any event, it will make for a better written version—all the possibilities and outcomes still intact, with you forever thinking well, what if I had done this or that? You see, when a lover wants to leave, there is no other outcome. Only when you yourself have left someone will you know what this means—but for now, you are only you and you are never the one who leaves. It is better to close the theme quietly, with an ever-evasive ending, on tip-toe with breath held, a noose, a sinking stone.

Margaret had the best driveway in the neighborhood for bike-riding, paved with tar each spring. It's not that I never met her, but that she had always been there—cross-stitching on the front porch with the hobble bushes blossoming, or reading the Bible past supertime in August when the goldenrods bid us goodbye and the pale winter heart set the wind to sough through the trees. I always waved, but never spoke more than a hello as I ran the bike's wheel off that smooth black inertia and onto the bumpy sidewalk home.

One Saturday afternoon in late March, after a week's warm weather melted snow banks high as houses to muddy caps and swept the sand and salt into slushy ditches, I drove my bike to her place and knocked with a plate of cookies I'd baked. She smiled opening the door. Smiled as if she'd been waiting for a long time and a long time passed after her back disappeared into the hall. I removed my galoshes. When I lifted my head I smelled mothballs and banana bread. She returned with a tiny hand-painted tray depicting a red barn and rooster. Piled on top: two glasses of milk, my plate of cookies (hard as hockey pucks), and a steamy apple pie.

When I found myself mad or embarrassed, scared or just throwing a tantrum, I'd play a game called "mute." You don't speak in the game of "mute." And I was playing "mute" with Margaret. Silence for over twenty minutes. I sucked the apple chunks one by delicious one, letting each dissolve in my mouth. Sentences gathered and scattered in my mind like robins in a tree when the wind changes direction. What was I supposed to tell this liver-spotted woman? That I learned to French kiss this winter by watching television?

That's when I sneezed. A terrible gunshot of a sneeze that fired snot all over the pretty tray, the kind of sneeze you try to subvert by sucking back in as much as you are able to inhale in a whiff. And that wasn't a bubble in her milk.

"God Bless You!" Margaret hollered.

I swept the mess into one rolled coat-sleeve while Margaret wiped down the table. "Do you know that river?" She asked. "Not the Raquet, but the big river back behind the cornfield?" I nodded and she continued, "Well I was born in a house that is now buried at the bottom of that river."

Natives called it, *The River that Walks*, serene and gentle, tucked between tall spruce, cedar and pine trees. Two tribes downstream, it was ferocious with cyclone rapids hidden beneath the deep black water, and known as *The Garden of the Great Spirit*. Margaret encouraged me to eat another slice of pie as I listened intently to my neighborhood on the St Lawrence River rolling backwards eighty years.

It was the first decade of the 20th century. The man who knocked on Margaret's door wore a suit. She'd never seen a man in a suit before and when he came to the door her mother began to sob hysterically until he assured her that her husband and sons were safe.

Margaret heard the man in the suit repeat the word “project” as she boiled water for coffee in the kitchen.

I interrupt her, “But why did you have to leave?”

She explained how the builders paid the landowners in the area a cash sum for their property that same day while Margaret’s father and brothers rode into town. No choice. Sign here and “Your evacuation is the week of...”

The houses were never torn down. The valley was deep and they cut a hole in the hillside, put up a dam, cranked the latch, and opened the door. I would dream about that river all spring. Little baby dolls floating inside the empty house, glass shattered by the water’s pressure, a dinner plate cracked on the kitchen floor, Margaret’s tiny made bed and the filling it would give. I’d stare into my lit aquarium at night with the white angelfish concealed inside the ceramic house and shudder.

I noticed the blackish-blue knot under Margaret’s chin while visiting one afternoon. I didn’t give it much thought, she was ninety and waddled like my best friend Jessica’s Mom did when she was ready to deliver Jessica’s little brother Jeremy, who cried often and spit up after every bottle feeding. So I sat next to Margaret on the couch, glancing at the knot jutting below the surface of her thin skin like a small black pearl. But I soon forgot about it, like I forgot the tangerine shade of her curtains as she spoke of how the Indians came into the village at dusk to rob the white people. Her mother hid the money inside pies.

The blackish-blue knot grew larger that summer and by the end of August its weekly increase was exponential until Margaret looked like a blue-throated bullfrog mid-croak. I only asked her once. Margaret didn’t believe in medicine. She married a Mohawk chief’s son against her parents’ wishes and her only child, a son, died during childbirth. There was no one except me to imagine what the blue knot under her chin could mean. Dying, Margaret told me, was like wearing glasses of recognition when you didn’t know you needed them. Suddenly you could see the black whisker mark on a sitting bittern or hear fragments of Chopin bowed between cricket legs. When I asked her what it felt like to die, she said, “You are only dead when there is no one left to remember you. We are all born again in memories, even after our bodies no longer inhabit the earth.”

The nurse told my mother when she found Margaret dead the following October— there were lit candles surrounding her room, like a shrine, as if she knew the time arrived. That night I dreamt I was walking across rocks in a shallow stream. The sun filtered through the tall oaks into the water and wavered mosaics of light over a bed of chalky oyster shells partially buried in the dirt.

More dreams have come and gone through the years, stages and cycles away from the river’s flowing, nonstop motion. A blue house is flooding. Rafters split and crack down the middle, glass shatters, and the roof blows off that terrific house as it fills.

